

FANUTZA¹

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(From *The Dial*)

LIGHT and soft, as though the wind were blowing the dust off the silver clouds that floated overhead. the first snow was falling over the barren lands stretching between the Danube and the Black Sea. A lowland wind, which had already hardened and tightened the marshes, was blowing the snow skywards. The fine silvery dust, caught between the two air currents, danced lustily, blown hither and thither until it took hold of folds and rifts in the frozen land and began to form rugged white ridges that stretched in soft silvery curves to meet other growing mountains of snow. The lowland wind, at first a mere breeze playfully teasing the north wind, like a child that kicks the bed-sheets before falling asleep, increased its force and swiftness, and scattered huge mountains of snow, but the steadily rising drone of the north wind soon mastered the situation. Like silver grain strewn by an unseen hand the snow fell obliquely in steady streams over the land. A great calm followed. The long Dobrudgean winter had started. In the dim steady light, in the wake of the great calm, travelling towards the Danube from the Black Sea, the "marea Neagra," four gipsy wagons, each drawn by four small horses, appeared on the frozen plains. The caravan was brought to a standstill within sight of the slowly moving river. The canvas-covered wagons ranged themselves, broadwise, in a straight line with the wind. Between the wagons enough space was allowed to stable the horses. Then, when that part of the business had been done, a dozen men, in furs from

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head to toe, quickly threw a canvas that roofed the temporary quarters of the animals and gave an additional overhead protection from the snow and wind to the dwellers of the wheeled homes.

While the unharnessing and quartering of the horses and the stretching of the canvas roof proceeded, a number of youngsters jumped down from the wagons, yelling and screaming with all the power of their lusty lungs. They threw snowballs at one another as they ran, some in search of firewood and others, with wooden pails dangling from ends of curved sticks over the left shoulder, in search of water for the horses and for the cooking pots of their mothers.

Soon afterwards, from little crooked black chimneys that pointed downwards over the roofs of the wagons, thick black smoke told that the fires were already started. The youngsters came back; those with the full water pails marching erectly with legs well apart; the ones with bundles of firewood strapped to their shoulders leaning forward on knotted sticks so as not to fall under the heavy burden.

When everything had been done, Marcu, the tall gray-bearded chief, inspected the work. A few of the ropes needed tightening. He did it himself, shaking his head in disapproval of the way in which it had been done. Then he listened carefully to the blowing of the wind and measured its velocity and intensity. He called to his men. When they had surrounded him, he spoke a few words. With shovels and axes they set energetically to work at his direction, packing a wall of snow and wood from the ground up over the axles of the wheels all around the wagons so as to give greater solidity to the whole and to prevent the cold wind from blowing underneath.

By the time the early night settled over the marshes, the camp was quiet and dark. Even the dogs had curled up near the tired horses and had gone to sleep.

Early the following morning the whole thing could not be distinguished from one of the hundreds of mountains of snow that had formed over night. After the horses had been fed and watered, Marcu, accompanied by his daugh-

ter, Fanutza, left the camp and went riverward, in search of the hut of the Tartar whose flat-bottomed boat was moored on the shore. Marcu knew every inch of the ground. He had camped there with his tribe twenty winters in succession. He sometimes arrived before, and at other times after, the first snow of the year. But every time he had gone to Mehmet Ali's hut and asked the Tartar to row him across the Danube, on the old Roumanian side, to buy there fodder for the horses and the men; enough to last until after the river was frozen tight and could be crossed securely with horses and wagon. He had always come alone to Mehmet's hut, therefore, the Tartar, after greeting Marcu and offering to do what his friend desired, inquired why the girl was beside the old chief.

"But this is my daughter, Fanutza, Mehmet Ali," Marcu informed.

"Who, Fanutza? She who was born here fourteen winters ago on the plains here?"

"The same, the same, my friend," Marcu answered as he smilingly appraised his daughter.

Mehmet Ali looked at the girl in frank astonishment at her size and full development; then he said as he took the oars from the corner of the hut: "And I, who thought that my friend had taken a new wife to himself! Allah, Allah! How fast these youngsters grow! And why do you take her along to the Giaour side, to the heathen side, of the river, friend?" he continued talking as he put heavy boots on his feet and measured Fanutza with his eyes as he spoke.

"For everything there is only one right time, say I, Marcu," the chief explained, in measured solemn voice. "And so now is the time for my daughter to get married. I have chosen her a husband from amongst the sons of my men, a husband who will become the chief when I am no longer here to come to your hut at the beginning of every winter. She shall marry him in the spring. I now go with her to the bazaars to buy silks and linens which the women of my tribe will fashion into new clothes for both. And may Allah be good to them."

"*Allah il Allah,*" Mehmet assured Marcu. "And who is he whom you have chosen from amongst your men?"

"I am old, Mehmet, I would otherwise have chosen a younger man for my daughter; but because I fear that this or the following winter will be the last one, I have chosen Stan, whose orphaned daughter is Fanutza's own age. He is good and true and strong. Young men never make careful chiefs."

"That be right and wise," remarked Mehmet, who was by that time ready for the trip. During the whole conversation the young gipsy girl had been looking to her father when he spoke and sidewise when Mehmet answered.

At fourteen Fanutza was a full-grown woman. Her hair, braided in tresses, was hanging from underneath a black fur cap she wore well over her forehead. Her eyes were large and brown, the long eyebrows were coal black. Her nose was straight and thin and the mouth full and red. Withal she was of a somewhat lighter hue than her father or the rest of the gipsy tribe. Yet there was something of a darker grain than the grain in her people that lurked beneath her skin. And she was light on her feet. Even trudging in the deep snow, she seemed more to float, to skim on top, than to walk.

Unconcerned she had listened to the conversation that had gone on between her father and the Tartar in the hut of the boatman. She had hardly been interested in the whole affair, yet, when Mehmet Ali mentioned casually as soon as he was outdoors that he knew a man who would pay twenty pieces of gold for such a wife as Fanutza was, she became interested in the conversation.

"I sell horses only," Marcu answered quietly.

"Yet my friend and others from his tribe have bought wives. Remember that beautiful Circassian girl?" the Tartar continued without raising or lowering his voice.

"Yes, Mehmet, we buy wives but we don't sell them."

"Which is not fair," Mehmet reflected aloud still in the same voice.

By that time they had reached the river shore. Mehmet, after rolling together the oil cloth that had covered the boat, helped the gipsy chief and his daughter to the stern.

With one strong push of the oar on the shore rock, the Tartar slid his boat a hundred feet towards the middle of the stream. Then he seated himself, face towards his passengers, and rowed steadily without saying a single word. The gipsy chief lit his short pipe and looked over his friend's head, trying to distinguish the other shore from behind the curtain of falling snow. The boat glided slowly over the thickening waters of the Danube. A heavy snowstorm, the heaviest of the year, lashed the river. When Mehmet had finally moored his boat to the Roumanian side of the Danube, he turned around to the gipsy chief and said:

"Be back before sundown. It shall be my last crossing of the year. For when the sun rises the waters will be frozen still. The gale blows from the land of the Russians."

"As you tell me, friend," answered Marcu while helping his daughter out of the boat.

When the two had gone a short distance Fanutza turned her head. Mehmet Ali was leaning on an oar and looking after them. A little later, a hundred paces further, she caught fragments of a Tartar song that reached her ears in spite of the shrill noises of the wind.

Marcu and his daughter entered the inn that stood a few hundred feet from the shore. The innkeeper, an old fat greasy Greek, Chiria Anastasidis, welcomed the gipsy chief. Not knowing the relationship between the old man and the girl, he feared to antagonize his customer by talking to the young woman. He pushed a white pine table near the big stove in the middle of the room and after putting two empty glasses on the table he inquired "White or red?"

"Red wine, Chiria. It warms quicker. I am getting old."

"Old!" exclaimed the Greek as he brought a small pitcher of wine. "Old! Why, Marcu, you are as young as you were twenty years ago."

"This is my daughter, Fanutza, Chiria, and not my wife."

"A fine daughter you have. Your daughter, eh?"

"Yes, and she is about to marry, too."

After they had clinked glasses and wished one another health and long years the innkeeper inquired:

"All your men healthy?"

"All. Only one-eyed Jancu died. You remember him. He was well along in years."

"*Bogda proste.* Let not a younger man than he was die," answered Anastasidis as he crossed himself.

After Marcu had declared himself warmed back to life by the fine wine he inquired of Anastasidis the price of oats and straw and hay. The innkeeper's store and his warehouse contained everything from a needle to an oxcart. The shelves were full of dry goods, socks, shirts, silks, belts, fur caps, coats, and trousers. Overhead, hanging from the ceiling, were heavy leather boots, shoes, saddles, harness of all kinds, fishers' nets, and even a red painted sleigh that swung on heavy chains. In one corner of the store blankets were piled high, while all over the floor were bags of dry beans and peas and corn and oats. At the door were bales of straw and hay, and outside, already half covered with snow, iron ploughs hobnobbed with small anchors, harrows, and bundles of scythes that leaned on the wall.

"Oats you wanted? Oats are very high this year, Marcu."

And the bargaining began. Fanutza sat listlessly on her chair and looked through the window. A few minutes later, the two men called one another thief and swindler and a hundred other names. Yet each time the bargain was concluded on a certain article they shook hands and repeated that they were the best friends on earth.

"Now that we have finished with the oats, Chiria, let's hear your price for corn? What? Three francs a hundred kilo? No. I call off the bargain on the oats. You are the biggest thief this side of the Danube."

"And you, you lowborn Tzigane, are the cheapest swindler on earth."

Quarrelling and shaking hands alternately and drinking wine Marcu and the Greek went on for hours. The gipsy chief had already bought all the food for his men and horses and a few extra blankets and had ordered it all carted to

the moored boat where Mehmet Ali was waiting, when Fanutza reminded her father of the silks and linen he wanted to buy.

"I have not forgotten, daughter, I have not forgotten." Fanutza approached the counter behind which the Greek stood ready to serve his customers.

"Show us some silks," she asked.

He emptied a whole shelf on the counter.

The old gipsy stood aside watching his daughter as she fingered the different pieces of coloured silk, which the shopkeeper praised as he himself touched the goods with thumb and forefinger in keen appreciation of the quality he offered. After she had selected all the colours she wanted and picked out the linen and neckerchiefs and ear-rings and tried on a pair of beautiful patent leather boots that reached over the knees and had stripes of red leather sewed on with yellow silk on the soft vamps, Fanutza declared that she had chosen everything she wanted. The bargaining between the Greek and the gipsy was about to start anew when Marcu looked out doors thoughtfully, stroked his beard and said to the innkeeper:

"Put away the things my daughter has selected. I shall come again, alone, to bargain for them."

"If my friend fears he has not enough money—" suavely intervened Anastasidis, as he placed a friendly hand on the gipsy's arm.

"When Marcu has no money he does not ask his women to select silk," haughtily interrupted the gipsy. "It will be as I said it will be. I come alone in a day if the river has frozen. In a day or a week. I come alone."

"Shall I, then, not take all these beautiful things along with me, now?" asked Fanutza in a plaintive yet reproachful tone. "There is Marcia who waits to see them. I have selected the same silk *basma* for her. Have you not promised me, even this morning —?"

"A woman must learn to keep her mouth shut," shouted Marcu as he angrily stamped his right foot on the floor. He looked at his daughter as he had never looked at her before. Only a few hours ago she was his little girl, a

child! He was marrying her off so soon to Stan, although it was the customary age for gipsies, against his desire, but because of his will to see her in good hands and to give to Stan the succession to the leadership of his tribe.

Only a few hours ago! What had brought about the change? Was it in him or in her? That cursed Tartar, Mehmet Ali, with his silly offer of twenty gold pieces! He, he had done it. Marcu looked again at his daughter. Her eyelids trembled nervously and there was a little repressed twitch about her mouth. She returned his glance at first, but lowered her eyes under her father's steady gaze. "Already a shameless creature," thought the old gipsy. But he could not bear to think that way about his little daughter, about his Fanutza. He also feared that she could feel his thoughts. He was ashamed of what passed through his mind. Rapidly enough in self-defense he turned against her the sharp edge of the argument. Why had she given him all those ugly thoughts?

"It will be as I said, Anastasidis. In a day or a week. When the river has frozen, I come alone. And now, Fanutza, we go. Night is coming close behind us. Come, you shall have all your silks."

The Greek accompanied them to the door. The cart that had brought the merchandise to the boat of the waiting Mehmet was returning.

"The water is thickening," the driver greeted the gipsy and his daughter.

They found Mehmet Ali seated in the boat expecting his passengers.

"Have you bought everything you intended?" the Tartar inquired as he slid the oars into the hoops.

"Everything," Marcu answered as he watched his daughter from the corner of an eye.

Vigorously Mehmet Ali rowed till well out into the wide river without saying another word. His manner was so detached that the gipsy chief thought the Tartar had already forgotten what had passed between them in the morning. Sure enough. Why! He was an old man, Mehmet Ali. It was possible he had been commissioned by some Dobrudgean Tartar chief to buy him

a wife. He had been refused and now he was no longer thinking about her. He will look somewhere else, where his offer might not be scorned. That offer of Mehmet had upset him. He had never thought of Fanutza other than as a child. Of course he was marrying her to Stan — but it was more like giving her a second father!

Suddenly the old gipsy looked at the Tartar who had lifted his oars from the water and brought the boat to an abrupt standstill. Mehmet Ali laid the paddles across the width of the boat and looking steadily into the eyes of Marcu, he said:

"As I said this morning, Marcu, it is not fair that you should buy wives from us when you like our women and not sell us yours when we like them."

"It is as it is," countered the gipsy savagely.

"But it is not fair," argued Mehmet, slyly watching every movement of his old friend.

"If Mehmet is tired my arms are strong enough to help if he wishes," remarked Marcu.

"No, I am not tired, but I should like my friend to know that I think it is not fair."

There was a long silence during which the boat was carried downstream although it was kept in the middle of the river by skilful little movements of the boatman.

Fanutza looked at the Tartar. He was about the same age as Stan was. Only he was stronger, taller, broader, swifter. When he chanced to look at her his small bead-like eyes bored through her like gimlets. No man had ever looked at her that way. Stan's eyes were much like her own father's eyes. The Tartar's face was much darker than her own. His nose was flat and his upper lip curled too much noseward and the lower one chinward, and his bulletlike head rose from between the shoulders. There was no neck. No, he was not beautiful to look at. But he was so different from Stan! So different from any of the other men she had seen every day since she was born. Why! Stan — Stan was like her father. They were all like him in her tribe!

"And, as I said," Mehemet continued after a while, "as I said, it is not fair. My friend must see that. It

is not fair. So I offer you twenty gold pieces for the girl. Is it a bargain?"

"She is not for sale," yelled Marcu, understanding too well the meaning of the oars out of the water.

"No?" wondered Mehmet, "not for twenty pieces of gold? Well, then I shall offer five more. Sure twenty-five is more than any of your people ever paid to us for a wife. It would shame my ancestors were I to offer more for a gipsy girl than they ever received for one of our women."

"She is not for sale," roared the gipsy at the top of his voice.

By that time the Tartar knew that Marcu was not armed. He knew the chief too well not to know that a knife or a pistol would have been the answer to his second offer and the implied insult to the race of gypsies.

Twenty-five gold pieces! thought Fanutza. Twenty-five gold pieces offered for her by a Tartar at a second bid. She knew what that meant. She had been raised in the noise of continual bargaining between Tartars and gipsies and Greeks. It meant much less than a quarter of the ultimate sum the Tartar was willing to pay. Would Stan ever have offered that for her? No, surely not. She looked at the Tartar and felt the passion that radiated from him. How lukewarm Stan was! And here was a man. Stopped the boat midstream and bargained for her, fought to possess her. Endangered his life for her. For it was a dangerous thing to do what he did and facing her father. Yet—she will have to marry Stan because her father bids it.

"I don't mean to offend you," the boatman spoke again, "but you are very slow in deciding whether you accept my bargain or not. Night is closing upon us."

Marcu did not answer immediately. The boat was carried downstream very rapidly. They were at least two miles too far down by now. Mehmet looked at Fanutza and found such lively interest in her eyes that he was encouraged to offer another five gold pieces for her.

It was a proud moment for the girl. So men were willing

to pay so much for her! But her heart almost sank when her father pulled out his purse from his pocket and said:

"Mehmet Ali, who is my best friend, has been so good to me these twenty years that I have thought to give him twenty gold pieces that he might buy himself a wife to keep his hut warm during the long winter. What say he to my friendship?"

"That is wonderful! Only now, he is not concerned about that, but about the fairness of his friend who does not want to sell wives to the men whose women he buys. I offer five more gold pieces which makes thirty-five in all. And I do that not for Marcu but for his daughter that she may know that I will not harm her and will for ever keep her well fed and buy her silks and jewels."

"Silks!" It occurred to the gipsy chief to look at his daughter at that moment. She turned her head away from his and looked at the Tartar, from under her brows. How had he known?

"A bargain is a bargain only when two men agree on something, says the Koran," the gipsy chief reminded the Tartar boatman. "I don't want to sell her."

"So we will travel downstream for a while," answered Mehmet Ali and crossed his arms.

After a while the gipsy chief who had reckoned that they must be fully five miles away from his home across the water made a new offer.

"A woman, Mehmet Ali, is a woman. They are all alike after you have known them. So I offer you thirty-five pieces of gold with which you can buy for yourself any other woman you please whenever you want."

Fanutza looked at the Tartar. Though it was getting dark she could see the play of every muscle of his face. Hardly had her father finished making his offer, when Mehmet, after one look at the girl, said:

"I offer fifty gold pieces for the girl. Is it a bargain?"

Fanutza's eyes met the eyes of her father. She looked at him entreatingly, "Don't give in to the Tartar," her eyes spoke clearly, and Marcu refused the offer.

"I offer you fifty instead that you buy yourself another woman than my daughter."

"No," answered the Tartar, "but I offer sixty for this one, here."

Quick as a flash Fanutza changed the encouraging glance she had thrown to the passionate man to a pleading look towards her father. "Poor, poor girl!" thought Marcu. "How she fears to lose me! How she fears I might accept the money and sell her to the Tartar!"

"A hundred gold pieces to row us across," he yelled, for the night was closing in upon them and the boat was being carried swiftly downstream. There was danger ahead of them. Marcu knew it.

"A hundred gold pieces is a great sum," mused Mehmet, "a great sum! It has taken twenty years of my life to save such a sum — yet, instead of accepting your offer, I will give you the same sum for the woman I want."

"Fool, a woman is only a woman. They are all alike," roared the gipsy.

"Not to me!" answered Mehmet Ali quietly. "I shall not say another word."

"Fool, fool, fool," roared the gipsy as he still tried to catch Fanutza's eye. It was already too dark.

"Not to me." The Tartar's words echoed in the girl's heart. "Not to me." Twenty years he had worked to save such a great sum. And now he refused an equal amount and was willing to pay it all for her. Would Stan have done that? Would anybody else have done that? Why should she be compelled to marry whom her father chose when men were willing to pay a hundred gold pieces for her? The old women of the camp had taught her to cook and to mend and to wash and to weave. She must know all that to be worthy of Stan, they had told her. And here was a man who did not know whether she knew any of these things who staked his life for her and offered a hundred gold pieces in the bargain! Twenty years of savings. Twenty years of work. It was not every day one met such a man. Surely, with one strong push of his arms he could throw her father overboard. He did not do it because he did not want to hurt her feelings. And as the silence continued Fanutza thought her father, too, was a fine man. It was fine of him to offer a hundred gold

pieces for her liberty. That was in itself a great thing. But did he do it only for her sake or wasn't it because of Stan, because of himself? And as she thought again of Mehmet's "Not to me," she remembered the fierce bitterness in her father's voice when he had yelled, "All women are alike." That was not true. If it were true why would Mehmet Ali want her and her only after having seen her only once? Then, too, all men must be alike! It was not so at all! Why! Mehmet Ali was not at all like Stan. And he offered a hundred pieces of gold. No. Stan was of the kind who think all women are alike. That was it. All her people were thinking all women were alike. That was it. Surely all the men in the tribe were alike in that. All her father had ever been to her, his kindness, his love was wiped away when he said those few words. The last few words of Mehmet Ali, "Not to me," were the sweetest music she had ever heard.

Marcu waited until it was dark enough for the Tartar not to see, when pressing significantly his daughter's foot, he said:

"So be it as you said. Row us across."

"It is not one minute too soon," Mehmet answered. "Only a short distance from here, where the river splits in three forks, is a great rock. Shake hands. Here. Now here is one oar. Pull as I count, *Bir, icki, outch, dort*. Again, *Bir, icki, outch, dort*. Lift your oar. Pull again. Two counts only. *Bir, icki*. So, now we row nearer to the shore. See that light there? Row towards it. Good. Marcu, your arm is still strong and steady and you can drive a good bargain."

Again and again the gipsy pressed the foot of his daughter as he bent over the oar. She should know of course that he never intended to keep his end of the bargain. He gave in only when he saw that the Tartar meant to wreck them all on the rocks ahead of them. Why had he, old and experienced as he was, having dealt with those devils of Tartars for so many years, not known better than to return to the boat after he had heard Mehmet say, "It is not fair!" And after he had reflected on the Tartar's words, why, after he had refused to buy

all the silks and linen on that reflection, not a very clear one at first, why had he not told Mehmet to row across alone and deliver the fodder and food. He could have passed the night in Anastasidis' inn and hired another boat the following morning if the river had not frozen meanwhile! He should have known, he who knew these passionate beasts so well. It was all the same with them; whether they set their eyes on a horse that captured their fancy or a woman. They were willing to kill or be killed in the fight for what they wanted. A hundred gold pieces for a woman! Twenty years' work for a woman!

The two men rowed in silence, each one planning how to outwit the other and each one knowing that the other was planning likewise. According to Tartar ethics the bargain was a bargain. When the boat had been pulled out of danger Mehmet hastened to fulfil his end. With one jerk he loosened a heavy belt underneath his coat and pulled out a leather purse which he threw to Marcu. As he did so he met Fanutza's proud eye.

"Here. Count it. Just one hundred."

"That's good enough," the gipsy chief answered as he put the purse in his pocket without even looking at it. "Row, I am cold. I am anxious to be home."

"It will not be before daylight, chief," remarked Mehmet Ali as he bent again over his oars and counted aloud, "*Bir, icki, Bir, icki.*" An hour later, Fanutza had fallen asleep on the bags of fodder and was covered by the heavy fur coat of the Tartar. The two men rowed the whole night upstream against the current in the slushy heavy waters of the Danube. A hundred times floating pieces of ice had bent back the flat of the oar Marcu was handling, and every time Mehmet had saved it from breaking by a deft stroke of his own oar or by some other similar movement. He was a waterman and knew the ways of the water as well as Marcu himself knew the murky roads of the marshes. The gipsy could not help but admire the powerful quick movements of the Tartar — yet — to be forced into selling his daughter — that was another thing.

At daylight they were within sight of Mehmet's hut

on the shore. The storm had abated. Standing up on the bags of fodder Marcu saw the black smoke that rose from his camp. His people must be waiting on the shore. They were a dozen men. Mehmet was one alone. He will unload the goods first; then, when his men will be near enough, he will tell Fanutza to run towards them. Let Mehmet come to take her if he dare!

A violent jerk woke the gipsy girl from her sleep. She looked at the two men but said nothing. When the boat was moored, the whole tribe of gipsies, who had already mourned their chief yet hoped against hope and watched the length of the shore, surrounded the two men and the woman. There was a noisy welcome. While some of the men helped unload the boat a boy came running with a sleigh cart.

When all the bags were loaded on the sleigh Marcu threw the heavy purse Mehmet had given him to the Tartar's feet and grabbed the arm of his Fanutza.

"Here is your money, Mehmet. I take my daughter."

But before he knew what had happened, Fanutza shook off his grip and picking up the purse she threw it at her father, saying:

"Take it. Give it to Stan that he should buy with the gold another woman. To him all women are alike. But not to Mehmet Ali. So I shall stay with him. A bargain is a bargain. He staked his life for me."

Marcu knew it was the end. "All women are alike," he whined to Stan as he handed him the purse. "Take it. All women are alike," he repeated with bitterness as he made a savage movement towards his daughter.

"All, save the ones with blood of Chans in their veins," said Mehmet Ali who had put himself between the girl and the whole of her tribe. And the Tartar's words served as a reminder to Marcu that Fanutza's own mother had been the daughter of a Tartar chief and a white woman.